

# SUMMERHILL

A. S. NEILL



an eklavya publication



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Cartoon by Harry Herring

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Alexander Sutherland Neill  
(1883-1973)

## To Harold H. Hart\*

I hope you will get as much credit (or blame) for this book as I will. You have acted, not as a publisher, but as a believer in what Summerhill has done and is doing.

Your patience has amazed me. To sort out thousands of words from four of my earlier books, to edit them and combine them with new material – this has been a formidable task.

In your visits to the school, you showed that your chief concern was to tell America about something you saw and loved and believed in. Here you were part of the school. You saw all the fundamentals and rightly ignored what did not matter, for example, the untidiness of happy children.

I hereby elect you an honorary pupil of Summerhill.

A. S. Neill  
October 30, 1959  
Summerhill, Leiston, Suffolk, England

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\*Harold H. Hart: Publisher of the first edition of *Summerhill*.

## Publisher's Note

This book is as much about children as it is about adults. It is not the story of educating in a curriculum but of being a different kind of parent or guardian.

After teaching in many ordinary schools, A. S. Neill and his first wife Frau Neustater decided to start a school that would use psychoanalytical findings for the upbringing of one generation of humans – a school where children could be just as they are. Summerhill, a school that had begun in Germany in 1921, shifted to a village near London in 1924. Since then about fifty children between five and fifteen years of age have lived there every year. These days the number has gone up to about seventy. It is a fully residential school and its motto is freedom. But this freedom comes with two conditions; one, there are rules that are assumed to be necessary for the safety of the students, and two, there are rules made by the general body of the school. These latter kind of rules are enforced by the students and, if needed, can even be changed by the students.

The experience gained by Neill while teaching in Summerhill for forty years is what he has written about in this book. Self-discipline, etiquette, self-study, work, play, drama, music, religion, sex, fear, inferiority complex, the world of fantasy, lying, obedience, punishment, toilet training, toys, money, homosexuality, masturbation, stealing and many such things trouble children's parents and guardians day and night. Through this book Neill presents his perspective on these issues and the many real-life experiences that he has had with children. Influenced by the principles propounded by Sigmund Freud, Neill tells us how repressing the natural interests of childhood breeds hatred and frustration that give rise to the inhumanity and cruelty seen in the world.

Today, things have moved on from Freud's initial beliefs and psychoanalysts accept that socio-political developments, too, have a role to play. The happenings of the world outside us are not merely the result of the repression of our internal, mainly sexual desires. Even so, many of Freud's principles continue to be relevant. We still believe, for example, that unconscious thoughts and feelings can influence a person's work; that childhood experiences affect the development of a person's individuality; and that childhood sexual desires cause anxieties and insecurities. From this perspective, this document on Summerhill retains its importance and attraction. The preface written by Eric Fromm for the 1960 edition of this book is reproduced here. It describes at length the primary significance of *Summerhill*.

Summerhill inspired many similar concepts of schooling in Europe and America. Till his death in 1973, Neill continued to look over the functioning of the school. After him, his second wife, Anna, managed it till 1985. Since then, his daughter, Zoë, has performed this function. The school has remained unchanged in its basics during all these years. Meanwhile, the book *Summerhill* has been integrated into the psychology and education syllabi of many American universities. Many parents, influenced by this book, have been coming to England to admit their children in the school. Of about seventy students in the school, many come from Germany, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Brazil, Spain, America, Indonesia and France, etc. In addition, there are about twelve members of the staff.

Summerhill has never had a very large number of students and the school has to make strenuous efforts to attract students and to strengthen its resources. The British government has tried to close the school on several occasions by stating in its evaluations that the achievement levels of the students are not satisfactory. But Summerhill has overcome all such obstacles and has continued to be in existence for eighty-five years. It does not provide a readymade solution to the problems of society, but keeps alive a valuable research within the framework of the wider objectives of education.

People struggling to find the path towards the right kind of society and education need to learn from such experiences. When Summerhill was coming up, experiments were taking place in the Soviet Union to create a new society through education. During the same period, in India, Gandhi, Tagore, Krishnamurthy and Gijubhai were putting their ideas into practice. While there were some similarities in these experiments, there were differences too. Nevertheless, all these initiatives laid trust on the inbuilt goodness and honesty of children. They emphasised that affective development was as important as cognitive development; that what truly matters in education is self-motivation, freedom and self-discipline; that education should enable us to grow with our innate creativity and dynamism and shape our individuality.

We need to mull over the implications of these educational experiments as we give shape to our struggles today. We believe that the publication of this Indian edition of *Summerhill* will greatly aid our reflections. This honest account of the brave experiences of the Summerhill school will make us look back at our childhood; it will also light up the future we are trying to build.

Rashmi Paliwal  
Eklavya

## A Foreword by Erich Fromm

During the eighteenth century, the ideas of freedom, democracy, and self-determination were proclaimed by progressive thinkers; and by the first half of the 1900s, these ideas came to fruition in the field of education. The basic principle of such self-determination was the replacement of authority by freedom, to teach the child *without the use of force* by appealing to his curiosity and spontaneous needs, and thus to get him interested in the world around him. This attitude marked the beginning of progressive education and was an important step in human development.

But the results of this new method were often disappointing. In recent years, an increasing reaction against progressive education has set in. Today, many people believe the theory itself erroneous and that it should be thrown overboard. There is a strong movement afoot for more and more discipline, and even a campaign to permit physical punishment of pupils by public school teachers.

Perhaps the most important factor in this reaction is the remarkable success in teaching achieved in the Soviet Union. There the old-fashioned methods of authoritarianism are applied in full strength; and the results, as far as knowledge is concerned, seem to indicate that we had better revert to the old disciplines and forget about the freedom of the child.

Is the idea of education without force wrong? Even if the idea itself is not wrong, how can we explain its relative failure?

I believe the idea of freedom for children was not wrong, but the idea of freedom has almost always been perverted. To discuss this matter clearly, we must first understand the nature of freedom; and to do this, we must differentiate between *overt authority* and *anonymous authority*.

Overt authority is exercised directly and explicitly. The person in

authority frankly tells the one who is subject to him, "You must do this. If you do not, certain sanctions will be applied against you." Anonymous authority tends to hide the face that is being used. Anonymous authority pretends that there is no authority, that all is done with the consent of the individual. While the teacher of the past said to Johnny, "You must do this. If you don't, I'll punish you," today's teacher says, "I am sure you'll like to do this." Here, the sanction for disobedience is not corporal punishment, but the suffering face of the parent, or, what is worse, conveying the feeling of not being "adjusted", of not acting the crowd acts. Overt authority used physical force; anonymous authority employs psychic manipulation.

The change from the overt authority of the nineteenth century to the anonymous authority of the twentieth was determined by the organisational needs of our modern industrial society. The concentration of capital led to the formation of giant enterprises managed by hierarchically organised bureaucracies. Large conglomerations of workers and clerks work together, each individual a part of a vast organised production machine which, in order to run at all, must run smoothly and without interruption. The individual worker becomes merely a cog in this machine. In such a production organisation, the individual is managed and manipulated.

And in the sphere of consumption (in which the individual allegedly expresses his free choice), he is likewise managed and manipulated. Whether it be the consumption of food, clothing, liquor, cigarettes, cinema or television programmes, a powerful suggestion apparatus is at work with two purposes: first, to constantly increase the individual's appetite for new commodities; and secondly, to direct these appetites into the channels most profitable for industry. Man is transformed into the consumer, the eternal suckling, whose one wish is to consume more and "better" things.

Our economic system must create men who fit its needs, men who cooperate smoothly, men who *want* to consume more and more. Our system must create men whose tastes are standardised, men who can be easily influenced, men whose needs can be

anticipated. Our system needs men who feel free and independent but who are nevertheless willing to do what is expected of them, men who will fit into the social machine without friction, who can be guided without force, who can be led without leaders, and who can be directed without any aim except the one to "make good". It is not that authority has disappeared, nor even that it has lost its strength, but that it has been transformed from the overt authority of force to the anonymous authority of persuasion and suggestion. In other words, in order to be adaptable modern man is obliged to nourish the illusion that everything is done with his consent, even though such consent is extracted from him by subtle manipulation. His consent is obtained, as it were, behind his back, or behind his consciousness.

The same artifices are employed in progressive education. The child is forced to swallow the pill, but the pill is given a sugar coating. Parents and teachers have confused true non-authoritarian education with education by means of *persuasion and hidden coercion*. Progressive education has been thus debased. It has failed to become what it was intended to be and has never developed as it was meant to.

A. S. Neill's system is a radical approach to child rearing. In my opinion, his book is of great importance because it represents the true principle of education without fuss. In Summerhill School, authority does not mask a system of manipulation.

Summerhill does not expound a theory; it relates the actual experience of almost forty years. The author contends that "freedom works".

The principles underlying Neill's system are presented in this book, simply and unequivocally. They are these in summary.

- I. Neill maintains a firm faith "in the goodness of the child". He believes that the average child is not born a cripple, a coward, or a soulless automaton, but has full potentialities to love life and to be interested in life.
- II. The aim of education – in fact, the aim of life – is to work

joyfully and to find happiness. Happiness, according to Neill, means being interested in life, or, as I would put it, responding to life, not just with one's brain but with one's whole personality.

- III. In education, intellectual development is not enough. Education must be both intellectual and emotional. In modern society, we find an increasing separation between intellect and feeling. The experiences of man today are mainly experiences of thought rather than an immediate grasp of what his heart feels, his eyes see, and his ears hear. In fact, this separation between intellect and feeling has led modern man to a near schizoid state of mind in which he has become almost incapable of experiencing anything except in thought.
- IV. Education must be geared to the psychic needs and capacities of the child. The child is not an altruist. He does not yet love, in the sense of the mature love of an adult. It is an error to expect something from a child, which he can show only in a hypocritical way. Altruism develops after childhood.
- V. Discipline, dogmatically imposed, and punishment create fear; and fear creates hostility. This hostility may not be conscious and overt, but it nevertheless paralyses endeavour and authenticity of feeling. The extensive disciplining of children is harmful and thwarts sound psychic development.
- VI. Freedom does not mean licence. This very important principle, emphasized by Neill, is that respect for the individual must be mutual. A teacher does not use force against a child, nor has a child the right to use force against a teacher. A child may not intrude upon an adult just because he is a child, nor may a child use pressure in the many ways in which a child can.
- VII. Closely related to this principle is the need for true sincerity on the part of the teacher. The author says that never in the forty years of his work in Summerhill has he lied to a child. Anyone who reads this book will be convinced that this

statement, which might sound like boasting, is the simple truth.

- VIII. Healthy human development makes it necessary that a child eventually cut the primary ties which connect him with his father and mother, or with later substitutes in society, and that he become truly independent. He must learn to face the world as an individual. He must learn to find his security not in any symbiotic attachment, but in his capacity to grasp the world intellectually, emotionally, and artistically. He must use all his powers to find union with the world, rather than to find security through submission or domination.
- IX. Guilt feelings primarily have the function of binding the child to authority. Guilt feelings are an impediment to independence; they start a cycle, which oscillates constantly between rebellion, repentance, submission, and new rebellion. Guilt, as most people in our society feel it, is not primarily a reaction to the voice of conscience, but essentially an awareness of obedience against authority and fear of reprisal. It does not matter whether such punishment is physical or a withdrawal of love, or whether we simply are made to feel an outsider. All such guilt feelings create fear; and fear breeds hostility and hypocrisy.
- X. Summerhill School does not offer religious education. This, however, does not mean that Summerhill is not concerned with what might be loosely called the basic humanistic values. Neill puts it succinctly: "The battle is not between believers in theology and non-believers in theology; it is between believers in human freedom and believers in the suppression of human freedom." The author continues, "Some day a new generation will not accept the obsolete religion and myths of today. When the new religion comes, it will refute the idea of man's being born in sin. A new religion will praise God by making men happy."

Neill is a critic of present-day society. He emphasises that the kind of person we develop is a mass-man. "We are living in an

insane society" and "most of our religious practices are sham". Quite logically, the author is an internationalist, and holds a firm and uncompromising position that readiness for war is a barbaric atavism of the human race. Indeed, Neill does not try to educate children to fit well into the existing order, but endeavours to rear children who will become happy human beings, men and women whose values are not to have much, not to use much, but to be much. Neill is a realist; he can see that even though the children he educates will not necessarily be extremely successful in the worldly sense, they will have acquired a sense of genuineness which will effectually prevent their becoming misfits or starving beggars. The author has made a decision between full human development and full market-place and he is uncompromisingly honest in the way he pursues the road to his chosen goal.

Reading this book, I have felt greatly stimulated and encouraged. I hope many other readers will. This does not mean that I agree with every statement the author makes. Certainly most readers will not read this book as if it were the Gospel, and I am sure that the author, least of all, would want this to happen.

I might indicate two of my main reservations. I feel that Neill somewhat underestimates the importance, pleasure, and authenticity of an intellectual in favour of an artistic and emotional grasp of the world. Furthermore, the author is steeped in the assumptions of Freud; and as I see it, he somewhat overestimates the significance of sex, as Freudians tend to do. Yet I retain the impression that the author is a man with such a genuine grasp of what goes on in a child that these criticisms refer more to some of his formulations than to his actual approach to the child.

I stress the word "realism" because what strikes me most in the author's approach is his capacity to see, to discern fact from fiction, not to indulge in the rationalisations and illusions by which most people live, and by which they block authentic experience.

Neill is a man with a kind of courage rare today, the courage to believe in what he sees, and to combine realism with an unshakable faith in reason and love. He maintains an uncompromising reverence

for life, and a respect for the individual. He is an experimenter and an observer, not a dogmatist who has an egotistic stake in what he is doing. He mixes education with therapy, but for him therapy is not a separate matter to solve some special "problems", but simply the process of demonstrating to the child that life is there to be grasped, and not to run away from.

It will be clear to the reader that the experiment about which this book reports is necessarily one which cannot be repeated many times in our present-day society. This is so, not only because it depends on being carried out by an extraordinary person like Neill, but also because few parents have the courage and independence to care more for their children's happiness than for their "success". But this fact by no means diminishes the significance of this book.

Even though no school like Summerhill exists in the United States today, any parent can profit by reading this book. These chapters will challenge him to rethink his own approach to his child. He will find that Neill's way of handling children is quite different from what most people sneeringly brush aside as "permissive". Neill's insistence on a certain balance in the child-parent relationship, freedom without licence, is the kind of thinking that can radically change home attitudes.

The thoughtful parent will be shocked to realise the extent of pressure and power that he is unwittingly using against the child. This book should provide new meaning for the words love, approval and freedom. Neill shows uncompromising respect for life and freedom and a radical negation of the use of force. Children reared by such methods will develop within themselves the qualities of reason, love, integrity and courage, which are the goals of the Western humanistic tradition. If it can happen in Summerhill, it can happen everywhere, once the people are ready for it. Indeed, there are no problem children as the author says, but only "problem parents" and "problem humanity". I believe Neill's work is a seed which will germinate. In time, his ideas will become generally recognised in a new society in which man himself and his unfolding aim becomes the supreme aim of all social effort.

## A Word of Introduction

In psychology, no man knows very much. The inner forces of human life are still largely hidden from us.

Since Freud's genius made it alive, psychology has gone far; but it is still a new science, mapping out the coast of an unknown continent. Fifty years hence, psychologists will very likely smile at our ignorance of today.

Since I left education and took up child psychology, I have had all sorts of children to deal with – incendiaries, thieves, liars, bed-wetters and bad-tempered children. Years of intensive work in child training has convinced me that I know comparatively little of the forces that motivate life. I am convinced, however, that parents who have had to deal with only their own children know much less than I do.

It is because I believe that a difficult child is nearly always made difficult by wrong treatment at home that I dare address parents.

What is the province of psychology? I suggest the word curing. But what kind of curing? I do not want to be cured of my habit of choosing the colours orange and black; nor do I want to be cured of smoking; nor of my liking for a bottle of beer. No teacher has the right to cure a child of making noises on a drum. The only curing that should be practised is the curing of unhappiness.

The difficult child is the child who is unhappy. He is at war with himself; and in consequence, he is at war with the world.

The difficult adult is in the same boat. No happy man ever disturbed a meeting or preached a war, or lynched a Negro. No happy woman ever nagged her husband or her children. No happy man ever committed a murder or a theft. No happy employer ever frightened his employees.

All crimes, all hatred, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness. This book is an attempt to show how unhappiness arises, how it ruins human lives, and how children can be reared so that much of this unhappiness will never arise.

More than that, this book is the story of a place – Summerhill – where children's unhappiness is cured and, more important, where children are reared in happiness.

A. S. N.